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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 000204

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MEPP](#) [CH](#) [IS](#) [XF](#)  
SUBJECT: PRC/MEPP: CHINA VEXES ARABS WITH RESTRAINED  
RESPONSE TO GAZA CONFLICT

REF: BEIJING 165

Classified By: Acting Political Section Chief Ben Moeling.  
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: After a briefing by Chinese Middle East Envoy Sun Bigan, Arab ambassadors in China were frustrated and disappointed by Beijing's measured response to the recent Gaza violence, Arab embassy contacts said January 22. They expected Chinese condemnation of Israel, based on China's history of supporting the Palestinian cause. The failure to condemn Israel directly rendered meaningless Special Envoy Sun's "five principles" solution to the crisis, and they blamed China's tepid response on China's desire to develop closer long-term ties with Israel. Contacts at Arab embassies in Beijing told us that Arab League members also expressed to Special Envoy Sun frustration at what they perceive as efforts by the Chinese media to downplay the humanitarian aspects of the Gaza situation. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) China's Special Envoy to the Middle East Peace Process Ambassador Sun Bigan briefed the Arab League and Arab embassies in Beijing January 19 on his travel to the Middle East and China's "five principles" for dealing with the situation in Gaza. Post received a similar briefing January 20 (reftel). Ahmed Mustafa Fahmy, Assistant Head of Mission to the Arab League's mission to Beijing, Egyptian EmbOff Haitham Safey, and Saudi Embassy Economic Chief Majed Alshammary briefed PolOff on the Sun meeting.

Disappointment, Unmet Expectations of Chinese Support  
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¶3. (C) All three contacts reported disappointment with the Chinese position on Gaza, given China's historical support for the Palestinian cause and good relations with Arab countries in the Middle East. Egyptian EmbOff Haitham reported that the Arab ambassadors were dissatisfied with the outcome because of the expectation that China would more strongly condemn Israeli "military aggression." Instead, the ambassadors were frustrated that China sought primarily to "point the finger" at Hamas, Haitham noted, and also at China's refusal to deal with Hamas because it is a "non-state actor." He added that China has done "nothing except support UNSCR 1860."

¶4. (C) Ahmed Mustafa from the Arab League expressed similar frustration, saying their member states "did not appreciate" the Chinese response to the Gaza situation. He noted that Sun's "five principles" were a positive sign but there was no action from the Chinese to push the program forward. Ahmed Mustafa argued that this approach reflects China's traditional low-risk approach to Middle East engagement, and was thus not unexpected, but he added that the Arab ambassadors had expected more because of the humanitarian issues involved in the Gaza situation. Majed from the Saudi embassy agreed that they also had hoped for a "stronger" response from the Chinese.

## Contacts: Closer Ties with Israel Drove Chinese Response

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15. (C) All three contacts observed that the Chinese position on Gaza was carefully calibrated to take into consideration China's need to develop closer ties with Israel, a consideration that constrained Sun's mission from the outset.

Ahmed Mustafa noted that the Chinese strategy in the Middle East reflects the desire to have good relations with all countries, including Israel, as a part of its overall strategy for maintaining economic growth, especially given slowing global demand for Chinese goods. The shift toward Israel, he suggested, represents a trend that Arab countries understand and can accept in the long-term, but the Arab League was nevertheless frustrated by the moderate Chinese response to the Gaza conflict.

## Arab Frustration with Chinese Official Media Portrayal

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16. (C) Ahmed Mustafa said that the Arab League ambassadors also used their meeting with Special Envoy Sun to express their frustration at the portrayal of the violence in Gaza in the Chinese official media. He said that he believes the official press sought to downplay the extent of the damage in Gaza, especially by avoiding graphic images of the bloodshed.

Instead, he noted, the Chinese press played up Sun's diplomatic efforts. He said that the Arab League ambassadors complained to Sun that such coverage would give Chinese citizens a distorted impression of what was happening in Gaza. According to Ahmed Mustafa, the ambassadors told China

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that its coverage was less balanced than coverage in the western press.

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